GEORGE HERBERT AND EARLY MODERN MUSICAL CULTURE

Described by one contemporary as the 'sweet singer of the Temple', George Herbert has long been recognised as a lover of music. Nevertheless, Herbert's own participation in seventeenth-century musical culture has yet to be examined in detail. This is the first extended critical study to situate Herbert's roles as priest, poet and musician in the context of the musico-poetic activities of members of his extended family, from the song culture surrounding William Herbert and Mary Sidney to the philosophy of his eldest brother Edward Herbert of Cherbury. It examines the secular 'visual music' of the Stuart court masque as well as the sacred songs of the church. Arguing that Herbert's reading of Augustine helped to shape his musical thought, it explores the tension between the abstract ideal of music and its practical performance to articulate the distinctive theological insights Herbert derived from the musical culture of his time.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009098069

DOI: 10.1017/9781009106887

First published 2023

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Limited, Padstow, Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-09806-9 Hardback

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Preface

Many readers first encounter George Herbert's poetry, as I did, in musical settings. I vividly remember first coming across Herbert's poetry as a chorister learning Vaughan Williams's *Five Mystical Songs*, and being fascinated and intrigued by the words I was singing – what does 'calcined' mean, I wondered? Why is music three parts vied and multiplied? His poetry has long held an appeal for musicians, popular in both the simplest of hymn-settings and as the inspiration for more elaborate and extended choral works. Such continued musical interest in Herbert's verse recognises, I believe, something profoundly important and fundamental about his notion of poetry. Indeed, from the first publication of his verse, Herbert was lauded by his contemporaries as the 'sweet singer of the Temple',[1] and modern critics continue to recognise his interest in music: as Helen Wilcox notes, '*The Temple* is not only a picture gallery but a place of singing . . . The inspiration of music is not only present in the metaphors of his lyrics but is intrinsic to their very nature.'[2] There exist a number of studies, like John Hollander's *The Untuning of the Sky*, Louise Schleiner's *The Living Lyre in English Verse*, and Diane Kelsey McColley's *Poetry and Music in Seventeenth-Century England*, which include substantial discussions of Herbert's verse in the context of early modern musico-poetics.[3]

Yet for all this, there is still no extended and comprehensive account of Herbert's own musical activities and their impact on his poetic practice. This is in part because the attempt to articulate Herbert's understanding of the relationship between music and poetry in a historically nuanced manner forces us to recognise significant lacunae in our understanding of Herbert's experience of music-making, and of the ways in which those activities related to early modern musical culture more widely. Herbert's own music has long been silenced: while historical records suggest that Herbert was an accomplished and enthusiastic lutenist and viol-player who set and sang his poetry to music, we have very little precise information

about the actual notes he performed. There is no written record of Herbert's own settings (which may, indeed, never have been written down, but only improvised or sung from memory). And while a number of early seventeenth-century settings of his poetry survive, giving many insights into contemporary song culture, it is unlikely that Herbert ever heard or performed any of them: the critical consensus is that all of these settings postdate the posthumous publication of *The Temple* in 1633. As a result, literary criticism has tended to pay only fleeting attention to Herbert's actual musical practices, preferring instead to turn the notion of 'Herbert the musician' into an emblem of saintliness and lyric skill. Rather than understanding Herbert's music in a fuller sense as an embodied and socially engaged activity and a technology of devotion that complemented and interacted with his literary activities, such readings risk divorcing Herbert from the world – and sound-world – in which he lived and participated, returning us once again to the portrait of the cloistered and isolated poet, alone with the page.

This study places *The Temple* within the wider context of seventeenth-century musical culture, and particularly the practical music-making in which Herbert participated. Significantly, while that musical culture included church music, it was not limited to it, and the study of Herbert's music means not only engaging with seventeenth-century sacred music-making but also expanding our sense of music to explore a more comprehensive picture of early modern musical culture. This book attempts to give a broad sense of the diversity of the musical activities of Herbert, his family, and his friends. One important emphasis of this study is its attention to the vibrant and dynamic amateur musical activities that characterised the home life of Herbert and his immediate family. Herbert's more extended family play a prominent role too, exploring the musical patronage and song culture at the estate of William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, and the part Herbert's aristocratic kinsmen played in the spectacular musical and dramatic entertainments produced at the Stuart court. Ranging across the full gamut of the socio-political spectrum, this study recognises also Herbert's participation in a more popular culture of music-making, finding his verse resonating with not just a cultivated aesthetic of elite musical society but also the popular, ballad-like singing of metrical psalmody by his parishioners at Bemerton.

One of the consequences of approaching Herbert's musico-poetics through the musical culture that shaped it is that it challenges received opinions of Herbert's verse as a whole. Herbert's verse, and indeed metaphysical poetry in general, has been characterised as preoccupied with

transcendence; and this is true also of appreciations of Herbert's use of music, which has been seen as a metaphor that invokes notions of perfect harmonies quite distinct from the world of fallen, discordant humanity. Discovering the musical culture surrounding Herbert changes this. It is a musico-poetics grounded in a practice that speaks of participation and sociability; it is time-bound, evanescent, and often imperfect in its realisation, seeking to find a place for dissonance as well as concord within its aesthetic. Moreover, far from desiring to escape the world of discord, it acknowledges imperfection and dissonance as an integral feature of musical experience.

Such a reading reorients, too, the way we approach the contested issue of Herbert's theology. There is no doubt that Herbert's music speaks continually of God and of transcendence. But if music did speak of transcendence for Herbert, it did so nonetheless through immanent, embodied experience. Insofar as music intimates the divine, it does so through an incarnated present. Herbert's musico-poetics has often been read as an expression of Calvinist pietism suspicious of the bodily and the material, aspiring to the perfect harmonies away from this world. Examining more closely the musical culture that shapes Herbert's musico-poetics forces a reassessment of Herbert's theological standpoint and how his music and poetry express that theology. It is precisely the fact that music can comprehend both transcendent ideals and immanent realities that made it such an effective vehicle for Herbert's devotional poetics: music is divine not because it stands as celestial harmony over against earthly discord, but because it articulates the paradox and coincidence of both, an aural imitation and intimation of the mystery of the incarnation. In this respect, Herbert's music approaches what this book describes as an Augustinian understanding of the nature of music. Like Augustine, Herbert was well aware of the dangers of music: its potential for indulgent distraction could induce much anxiety for both writers. Yet despite such risks, an Augustinian musical aesthetics presents the particular merits of thinking devotionally in these terms: holding together the ideal and more immediate reality, understanding the ways in which the fallibility of human action can be comprehended within what Augustine describes as the *carmen universitas*, the great song of God's creation.

Reading Herbert as a musician as well as a poet of music has implications for broader questions of modern literary critical practice. As Jennifer Richards has recently noted in her important study of oral reading in the English Renaissance, 'Most of us read alone in private and public spaces which, if not silent, are quiet. This is bound to affect how we regard earlier

readers.'[4] It is easy to ignore sonic (and musical) experience in such silent encounters with the page, yet increasingly scholarship is becoming aware of the shortcomings of setting aside orality and the voice when reading early modern texts. We need not (and should not) subscribe to a reductive binarism between orality and literacy to understand the implications of this insight for reading *The Temple*. Herbert is certainly writing with an eye for the page – we need only to glance at 'Easter Wings' to see that – but we severely misrepresent his poetic if we are not equally alert to the ways in which his poetry is also born out of an important oral and aural sensibility. By approaching Herbert's musico-poetics in these terms, embedded in a culture of listening and sociable music-making, the present study joins the ranks of a growing body of scholarship that critiques a literary critical focus on the exclusive study of the written (rather than sounded) characteristics of language, and expands the insights of this work. Thinking in terms of *The Temple*'s architectural analogy is helpful here: this is not simply a visual edifice, but an acoustic space too, ringing with sound.

Acknowledgements

This book began life as a doctoral dissertation, and I would like to thank Gavin Alexander, my supervisor, for all his guidance, and Christ's College, Cambridge, who financially supported my work. Helen Wilcox and Sophie Read examined that dissertation, and I am grateful to them both for their searching questions at the time and their support and advice since. I was honoured to receive the inaugural George Herbert Society Chauncey Wood Dissertation Award, and would like to thank the judges Helen Vendler, Jonathan F. S. Post, and Sidney Gottlieb for their encouragement and comments. It was with great sadness that I learnt of the deaths of both Chauncey Wood and Cristina Malcolmson while working on the manuscript of this book. Tina generously involved me in research trips and conversations when working on Edward Herbert's *The Amazon*; and it was a privilege to receive, from Chauncey, the award that bears his name.

I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust, who awarded me a three-year Early Career Fellowship at the University of Warwick, and to my colleagues there, especially Teresa Grant and Elizabeth Clarke. I must also thank my colleagues at Little St Mary's and Peterhouse, Cambridge, for providing me with a musical and academic home in which to complete this book. The final stages of writing this book coincided with the extended closure of churches and the silencing of their choirs during the pandemic – a fact that brings home to me even more the invaluable place the music and companionship of the choirs of Little St Mary's and Peterhouse have in my life.

This book has taken many years to write, and I have incurred innumerable debts to many friends and colleagues: I would like to express particular thanks to Jennifer Adams-Massmann, Thomasin Bailey, Duncan Barrett, Susie Batey, Matthew Blaiden, Patricia Boulhosa, Christopher Burlinson, James Cameron, Marius Carney, Clarissa Chenovick, Ania Crowther, Geoff Dumbreck, Andrew Greany, Melissa and Zachary Guiliano, Stephen Hampton, Eleanor Hardy, Craig Hartley,

Christopher Hodgkins, David Humphreys, Will Irwin, Rebecca Jermy, Sarah MacDonald, Robert Mackley, Laura McKormack-Kilbride, Mary-Ann Middelkoop, Arabella Milbank, Greg Miller, Charlotte and Joe Perry, Lucy Razzall, Dunstan Roberts, James Robinson, Alec Roth, Jon Sanders, Michael Schoenfeldt, Chris Trundle, Diederik Vergunst, Mary Ward, Hanna Weibye, and Edward Wickham. Mary Ellen Lamb and Catherine Pickstock were kind enough to share with me their work on William Herbert and Edward Herbert, respectively. Gordon Callon prepared the transcription of Cherbury's 'Echo in a Church' included in Chapter 4. I am grateful also to Peter Webster, Judy Rees, and the George Herbert in Bemerton Group for inviting me to speak on a number of occasions in Herbert's church, and to Barry Ferguson and Marcus Tomalin for providing musical accompaniment on some of those occasions. At Cambridge University Press, I am grateful to Emily Hockley and her team for editorial guidance, and to the two anonymous readers, whose comments have helped to make this a much better book: any remaining errors, of course, are my own.

Finally, I could not have done this without the love and support of my family, Bruce and Wendy Jackson, Louise Poole, Robin Jackson, and David Jackson and their families. Above all I want to thank Simone Kotva and Freja Simonsdotter for the parts they have played in the writing of this book, and all the joy they bring.

Material from 'The Visual Music of the Masque, and George Herbert's *Temple*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 45:3 (Autumn 2015), 375–99, and 'Putting Things in Perspective: George Herbert's "Sinne (II)"', *George Herbert Journal*, 38 (2014–15), 120–34, appears in revised form in Chapter 3; earlier versions of parts of Chapter 4 appear as 'Becoming "a Citizen of the world": Edward Herbert and Continental Music-Making', in *Edward and George Herbert in the European Republic of Letters*, ed. Greg Miller and Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise (Manchester University Press, 2022); and material from '"Double Motion": Herbert and Seventeenth-Century Polyphonic Practice', *George Herbert Journal*, 37 (2013–14), 146–61 in Chapter 5. I am grateful to the editors of all these publications for permission to republish this material.